ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES REPUBLISHED ON MICROFICHE

Published on microfiche by:

Chadwyck-Healey Ltd
21 Bateman Street
Cambridge CB2 1NB
England

Somerset House
417 Maitland Avenue
Teaneck, NJ 07666
USA

Date of publication of master: 1977

Series: The purpose of this series is to make available those catalogues that have lasting interest through their text or their illustrations. Catalogues and cumulations of titles in the series are available from the publishers.

Serial numbers: Each title is identified by a three part serial number. The first part of the serial number designates the sales list in which the title was first announced. The second part indicates the agent of publication, i.e. the museum, gallery or organisation that was responsible for the publication of the catalogue. The third part of the serial number is the number allotted to that title.

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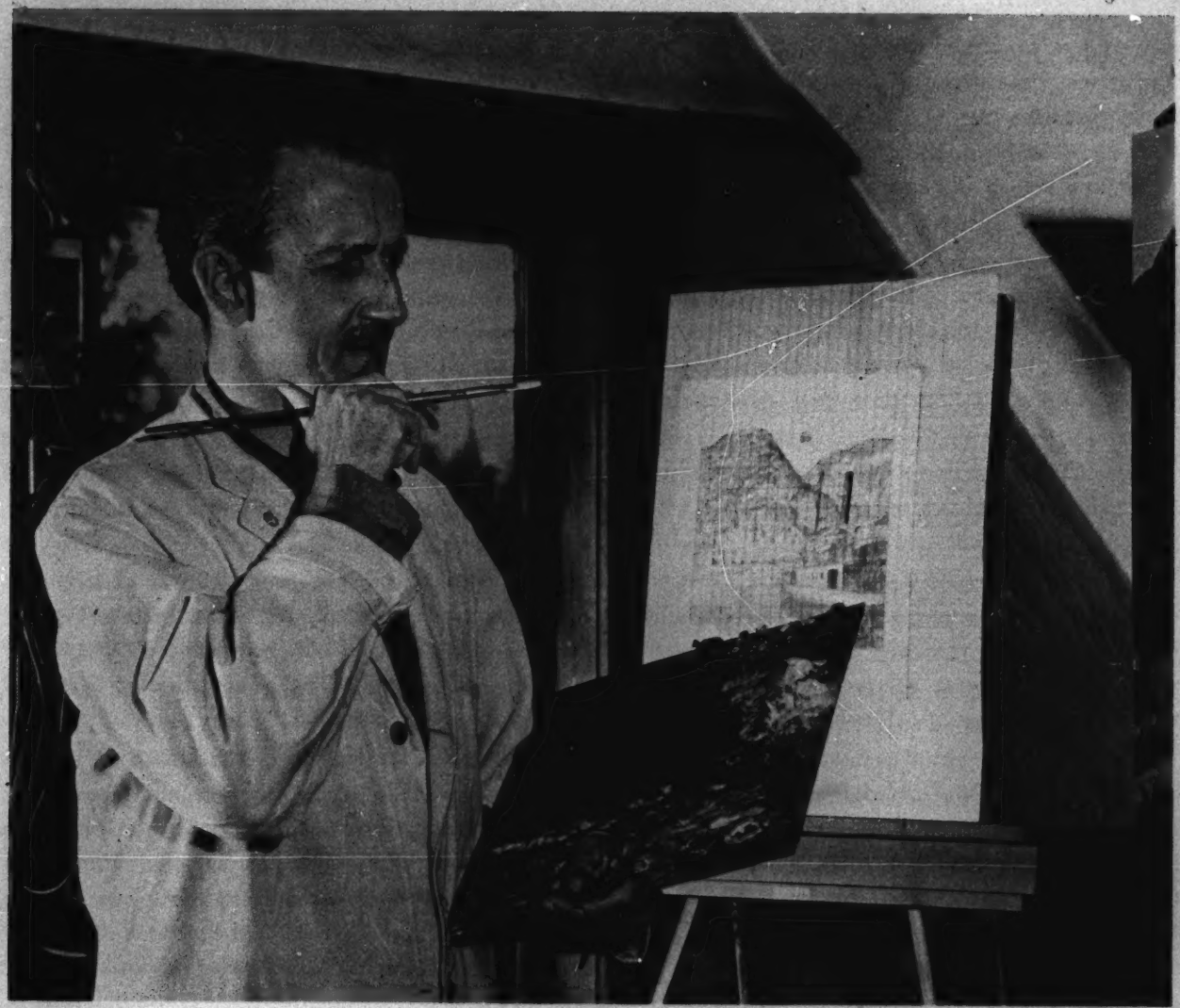
Technical data:

Producing laboratory: Chadwyck-Healey Ltd, Cambridge, England

General

E. J. HUGHES



E. J. HUGHES

a retrospective exhibition organized by
The Vancouver Art Gallery with the assistance of a
grant from the Canada Council.

The Vancouver Art Gallery October 5-29, 1967
York University Toronto
November 13-December 8, 1967

E. J. HUGHES is a regional painter and an eccentric. His regionalism relates directly to the unique and powerful geography of the Canadian west coast, — where mountains, extravagant growth, an epic sea edge and an insistent climate resist technology's efforts to obliterate nature or flatten her into a neutral and distant background for human activities. Apart from the years spent as a Canadian Army War Artist he has lived virtually all his life on this coast where he was born. It is only here and only in nature that he is himself and at home, as a person and as a painter. A cross-country trip he undertook in 1956 to paint the cities and country of Canada was a personal ordeal and an artistic failure. In every sense he is a painter of the west coast.

And he is an eccentric artist; he exists apart from the mainstream of twentieth century art and the historical and aesthetic self-consciousness which have been increasingly prominent aspects of it. His professed admiration for other artists over the years has included Giotto, Vermeer, Diego Rivera, Leonardo and more recently Thomas Girtin whose work has a quality he relates to his own goals. For the most part, that is, he relates himself to artists distant in time and different in their social contexts.

Today when the entire world has inescapably moved into a state of total and constant awareness and the artist as part of this whole is apt to find himself semi-paralyzed by his burden of knowledge, Hughes is one of the fortunate few who have, whatever the idiom, managed to *know* themselves and to keep that knowledge clear. *He is his own original.*

A true solitary for whom withdrawal is instinctive, he is ill at ease in the world of urban social or economic exchange and so he lives in a small village community on Vancouver Island with infrequent trips to Victoria only a few miles away, or to Vancouver, the major centre on the mainland. He would probably have had to give up painting many years ago were it not for an exclusive contract with a suitably distant gallery in Montreal which reduces his practical business contacts as a painter to an absolute minimum.

He learned 'how to paint' as it was still being taught with confidence in his student days at art school, — that is representation of the subject in the academic way through drawing and modelling by tone, and composition as a matter of hierarchic arrangement. He was very skilful at this as photographs of work done shortly after his graduation from art school show. He may still, according to his intent, call on this academic rendering technique relatively undisturbed by the intrusion of a more personal constituent, especially when he is dealing with a single close-up form as in his striking portrait of 1952. (No. 21.) It is recalled that as a student he was forever drawing tiny 'tin' soldiers — creating a fantasy play world which became reality in his role as a war artist. The careful and delicate early war drawings, several of which are included in this exhibition, speak of

The Vancouver Art Gallery would like to thank the private collectors and art institutions who were so cooperative in lending to this exhibition. The valuable help of Dr. Stern of the Dominion Gallery, Montreal, is gratefully acknowledged.

the sensitive artist and also of the man who had a long developing fascination with the minutia of objects — of costume, for instance and of firearms in all their parts and mechanisms. (Interestingly he was at one time a Bisley championship rifle shot.) There is from the beginning his feeling for clarity, order and precision. And from the beginning the possibility of the hallucinatory super-reality of things which have been held long and hard by the unblinking eye.

It is when he takes up his position in the open, painting 'scenes' — settings with or without figures and with the action taking place at a distance — that the formal style which we identify with Hughes appears. The hard-edged stone by stone, wavelet by wavelet, blade by blade of grass form of realism, with its pattern distributed rhythmically and equally across the canvas, the carefully balanced sharp contrasts of tone, the flattening areas of unmodulated dense colour, the rather isometric handling of space which causes a shipping dock or a road bed to rear up and spread to its full extent: these are the continuing components of his style.

But however engaging may be the formal means and the decorative qualities he has developed, it is the individual experiences projected with such vitality which give his paintings their distinction and their meaning. Subject matter is very important in his work, both to him and to us. We accept at the outset the intrinsic picturesque and romantic nature of the coast setting, and then realize that Hughes is drawn to *postcard* subjects — a sweep of highway with a valley vista, a *Mountie*, a sunset, the coastal ferries. "To make art out of picturesque and popular subjects" he has stated as his intention; or even more modestly "in a matter of fact way to organize nature as well as possible in the rectangle provided". He has never lost his sense of wonder in the face of nature. He responds to all her histrionics, and accepts her accommodation of man.

So his work commences with a deep and practised love of what he paints and an exacting observation of it. Since the intention is to *realize* the thing loved as fully as possible, he pays attention to its detail, gives maximum delineation and precise colour and tonal differentiation to all its forms.

The resulting paintings are vivid records. The character of the image is earnest directness; all his creative energy has been concentrated on *realization* and there are no unconsumed stylistic flourishes for their own sake. "I don't think they're just photographs" he will permit himself to say of his own work but he is not inclined to venture too far into self-analysis. Indeed they are not just photographs but what they record is not merely the visual data of the subjects (though many of his admirers enjoy them as just that) but his own personal view of the world, innocent and fresh, slowly distilled into a particular coast image.

Hughes knows that in staying so close to nature in its detail and its picturesque habits he is courting banality.

But his success lies precisely in not skirting the banal, but in pushing his own inner vision of reality *through* it. In the resulting tension lies his characteristic quality.

It is doubtful whether he himself is aware of the particular flavour and psychological edge his work has. To begin with, it is a particular part of the coast world he chooses: not untouched primeval nature nor nature a subdued backdrop for man's activities. It is man (as individual) and nature still in vital and meaningful confrontation. They get along together but in a state of mutual resilience. The fishermen ply their boats in seas choppy enough to prevent their relaxing at their work; the farmer systematically gathers his crop against a background of rising mountains and majestic trees which will always remind him of the true scale of his efforts; the clean little town is no more pushing back the landscape than it is firmly held by the hard green hills. In the last few years man has figured less frequently in the paintings though he is there by implication. The limpid lakes or rising mountains are breathtaking and they have prompted the traveller to stop and pay respect. There is no explicit opposition between man and nature but nature clearly has the advantage should she care to use it.

In many of his works there is the disquieting sense of *tempus fugit* as the busy summer ferries, symbols of transience and passing adventure, move across the field of vision. Comparison of drawings with the related paintings shows the flattening and vertical stretching of space as a device which satisfies his need for fuller delineation at the same time that it heightens the mood of tension. Horizons loom high or tilt with faint menace. A storm threatens, darkness comes on and colours take on an unnatural brightness, forms achieve a character of heightened reality. The projection of revealed moment arrested and charged with the weight of time, is all the sharper in light of the flat prosaic density of the pigment itself. Often the vision, in which everything is seen with such open-eyed staring clarity, borders on the hallucinatory.

Perhaps most subtly disquieting of all is the implication that (as sometimes in a dream) we are spectators in this world. The pageant of life is always going on, but always out there, in the distance. Even the foreground rocks or driftwood forms, compositional devices to relate us to the picture space, have the effect of pushing the *action* more remotely from us.

Canvases of the last few years have a new quietness. Not only have the figures largely disappeared and with them the human drama, but the form units have become larger and surfaces less continuously active. For the first time light is used which belongs to the picture as a whole — a limpid glassy light often pitched high in colour — and it is this which creates the mood, still one of certain tension.

The paintings do not come easily. By temperament Hughes is a slow and painstaking worker. In the earlier years

from 1947-1951 he produced no more than four or five canvases a year, working on two or three at a time and on one perhaps over a period of six months, adjusting tones, shifting forms until everything seemed "to come just right". X-rays of these early paintings would reveal whole histories of changes in which the contour of a beach shifts from left to right, a boat appears or disappears as the case might be. These canvases tended to acquire in this way dense surfaces which give a quality of concreteness to the experience. In more recent years, responding to the responsibility of being a full-time artist earning his living by painting, he has increased his production to about twelve canvases a year, depending on size. He regrets this relative speed and looks forward to some future time when each canvas can control its own slow evolution into completion.

In achieving the point of rightness, little is left to chance. Spontaneity is not his manner. Up till about 1959 he approached each painting through a series of drawings, commencing with enormously detailed notes providing full reference for a theme, working on through to a final drawing whose tonal structure and composition was fully worked out. Once one of these drawings became the *cartoon*, it was ruled off into squares so that the composition could be transferred to canvas. Later, to speed up his working procedure, he abandoned the drawn cartoon and for about a year produced watercolours as an intermediary stage, trying to get composition and colour both. This period, 1960-61, is marked by matching canvases and watercolours.

His current working practise is to make drawings directly on the spot, probably from his car, full of minute colour notes, but looser than the previous studio cartoons. Every two years or so he will paint a batch of watercolours, but these are primarily a matter of relaxation and loosening up for its own sake.

Still young at 54 Hughes has much painting ahead. Looking back over twenty or so years of his work one sees that it is characterized more by its consistency and continuity than by change. And this pattern will doubtless continue for although the external world figures so prominently in his art he is no extrovert. The well-springs of his paintings are deep in his own psyche. Essentially a loner and a non-intellectual, he belongs to no school and will never found one. He will not receive the acclaim of the true contemporary who adds collective relevance to whatever other qualities he may have, but on the other hand his private revelation is of a kind to resist the wearing of time. He has created a permanent poetry of Canada's Pacific coast and reiterated the continuing validity of the individual creative spirit.

Doris Shadbolt

PAINTINGS

Dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width. Medium is oil on canvas unless otherwise stated.

1 PAINTER'S MOTHER
19 x 13¾ oil on panel
s.d. 1939, lower left
Lent by the Dominion Gallery, Montreal

2 CANTEEN QUEUE, KISKA
40⅛ x 48⅛
s.d. 1944, lower left
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

3 UNLOADING SUPPLIES, KISKA
30 x 40
s.d. 1945, lower right
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

4 NEAR THIRD BEACH, STANLEY PARK
40 x 50
s.d. 1946-59, lower left
Lent by the Honourable John B. Aird, Q.C., Toronto

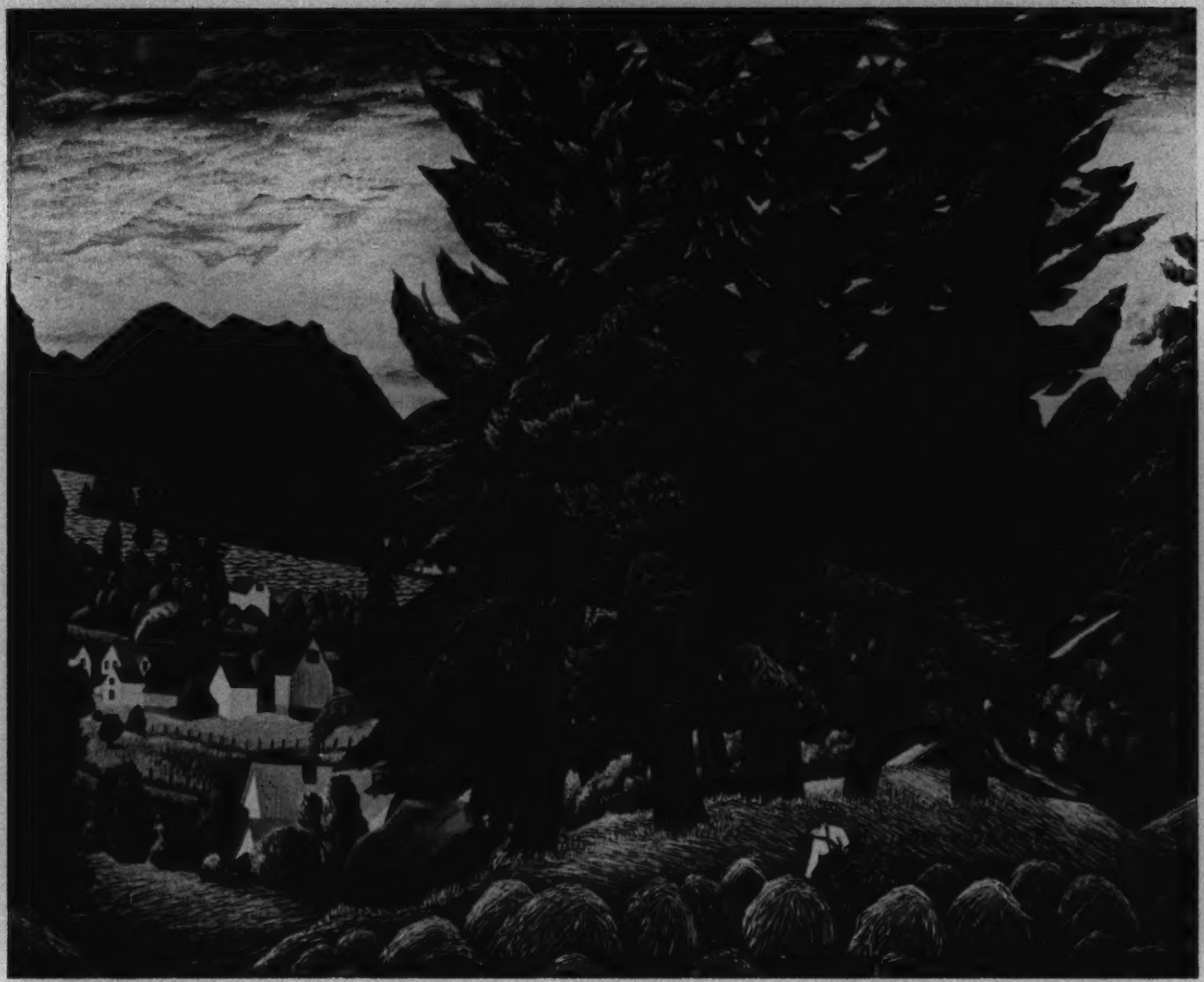
5 FISHBOATS, RIVER'S INLET
42 x 50
s.d. 1946, lower left
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. R. K. Porter, Toronto

6 INDIAN CHURCH, NORTH VANCOUVER
40 x 48
s.d. 1947, lower left
Private Collection, Montreal

7 ABANDONED VILLAGE, RIVER'S INLET, B.C.
31⅝ x 39½
s.d. 1947, lower left
The Brock Collection, University of British Columbia

8 COASTAL BOATS NEAR SIDNEY, B.C.
36 x 48
s.d. 1948, lower left of centre
Lent by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of B.C.

9 QUALICUM BEACH
36 x 42
s.d. 1948, lower right
Hart House Permanent Collection, Toronto

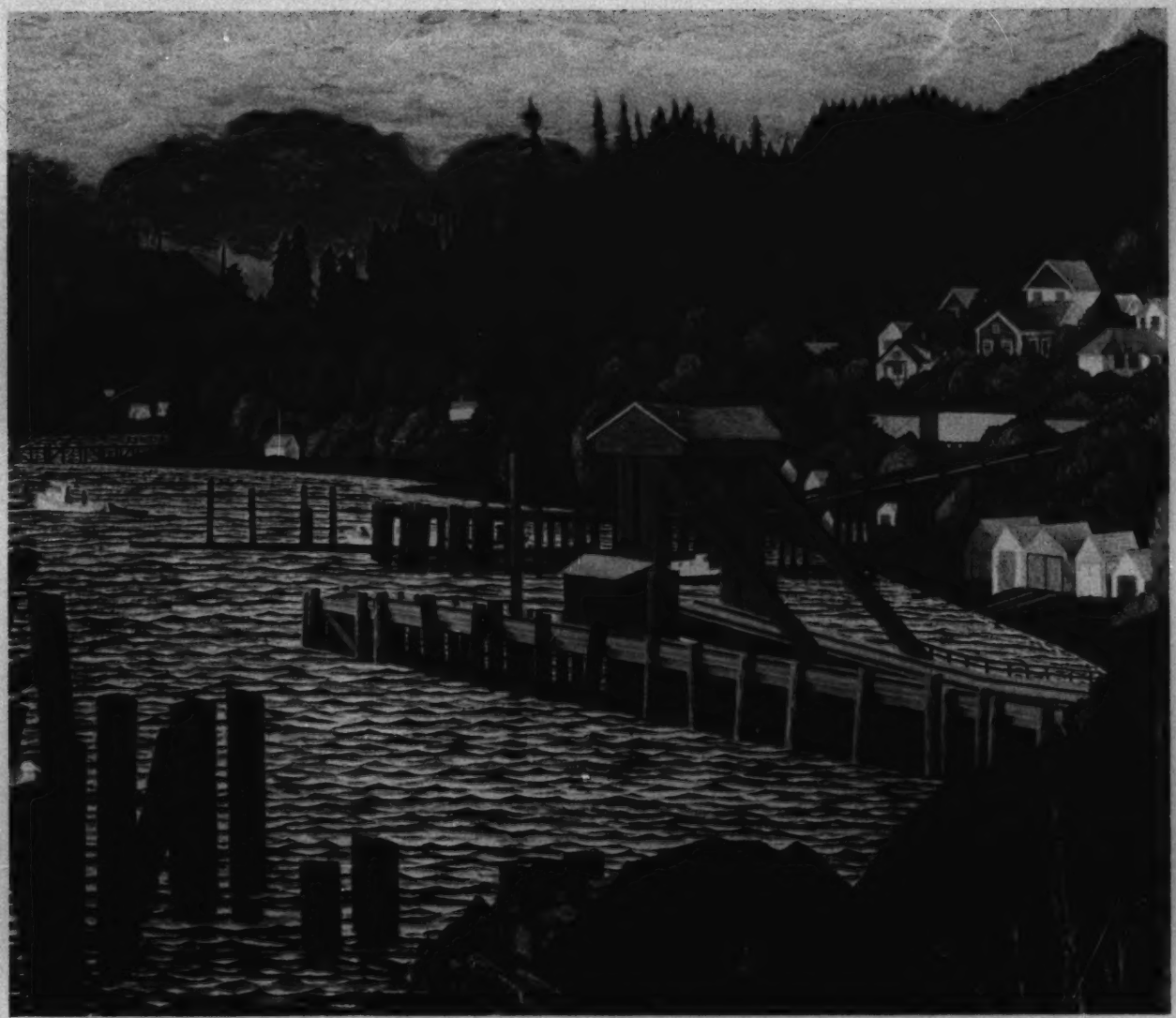


10 FARM NEAR COURTENAY, B.C.
30 x 38
s.d. 1949, lower right
The Vancouver Art Gallery

11 POST OFFICE AT COURTENAY, B.C.
38 x 48
s.d. 1949, lower right
Private Collection, Montreal

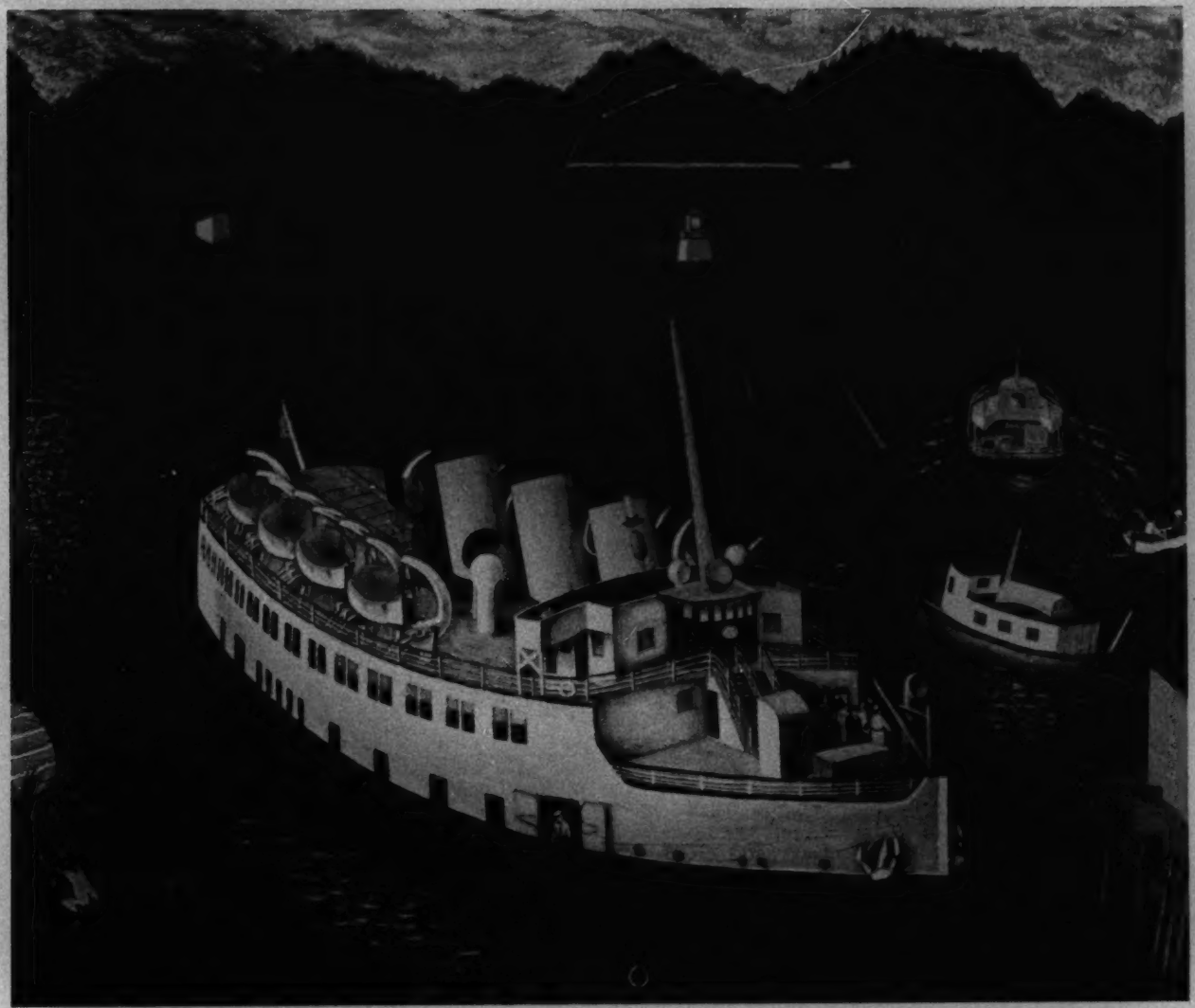
12 ENTRANCE TO HOWE SOUND
32 x 36
s.d. 1949, lower left
Lent by Mr. D. G. Hahn, Toronto

13 LOGS, LADYSMITH HARBOUR
30 x 40
s.d. 1949, lower left
Lent by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

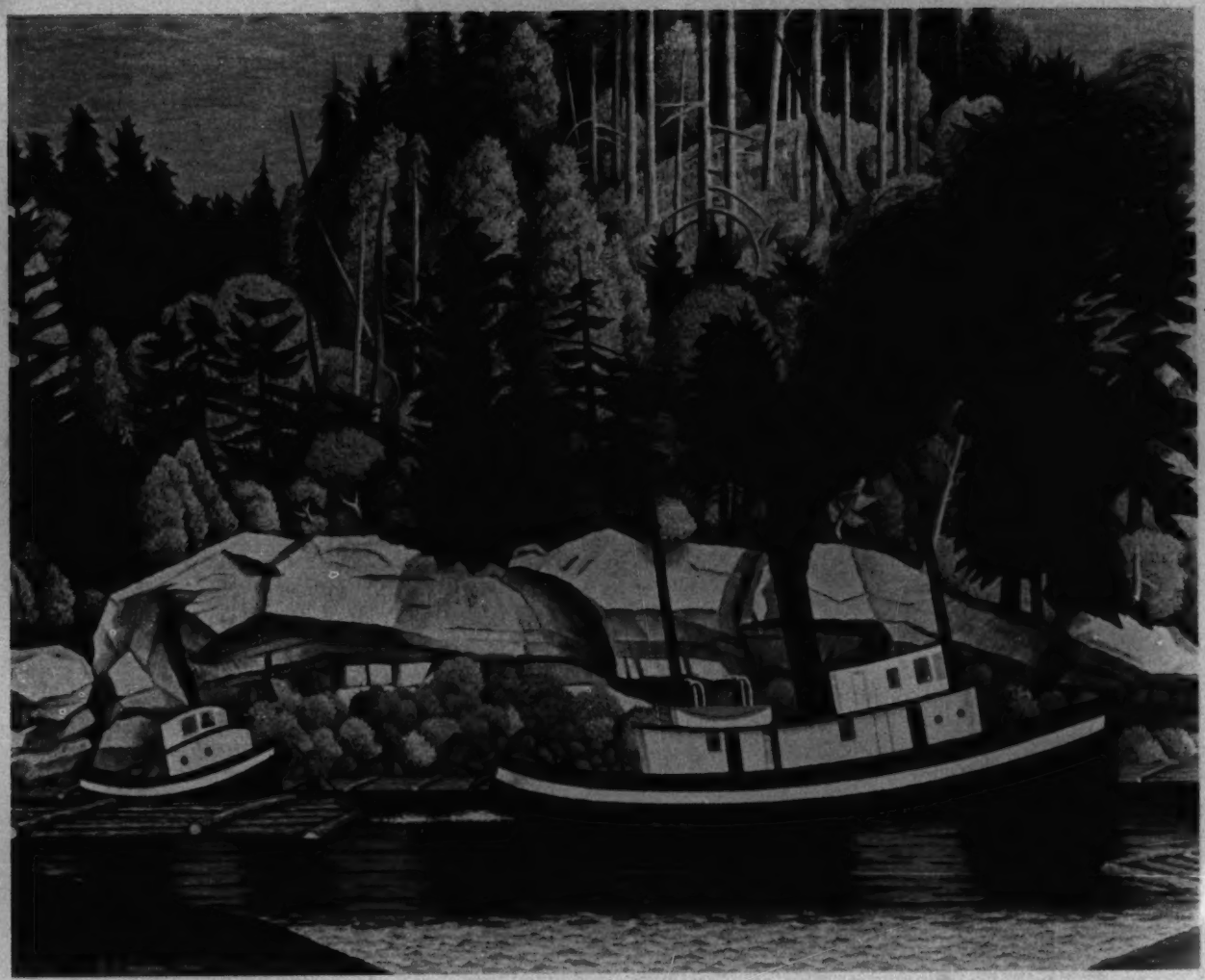


14 VIEW OF LADYSMITH HARBOUR
18 x 22¼
s.d. 1950, lower left
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Peek Philpott, Vancouver

15 LOW TIDE QUALICUM BEACH
20 x 26
s.d. 1950, lower left
Lent by Istvav Anhaf, Montreal



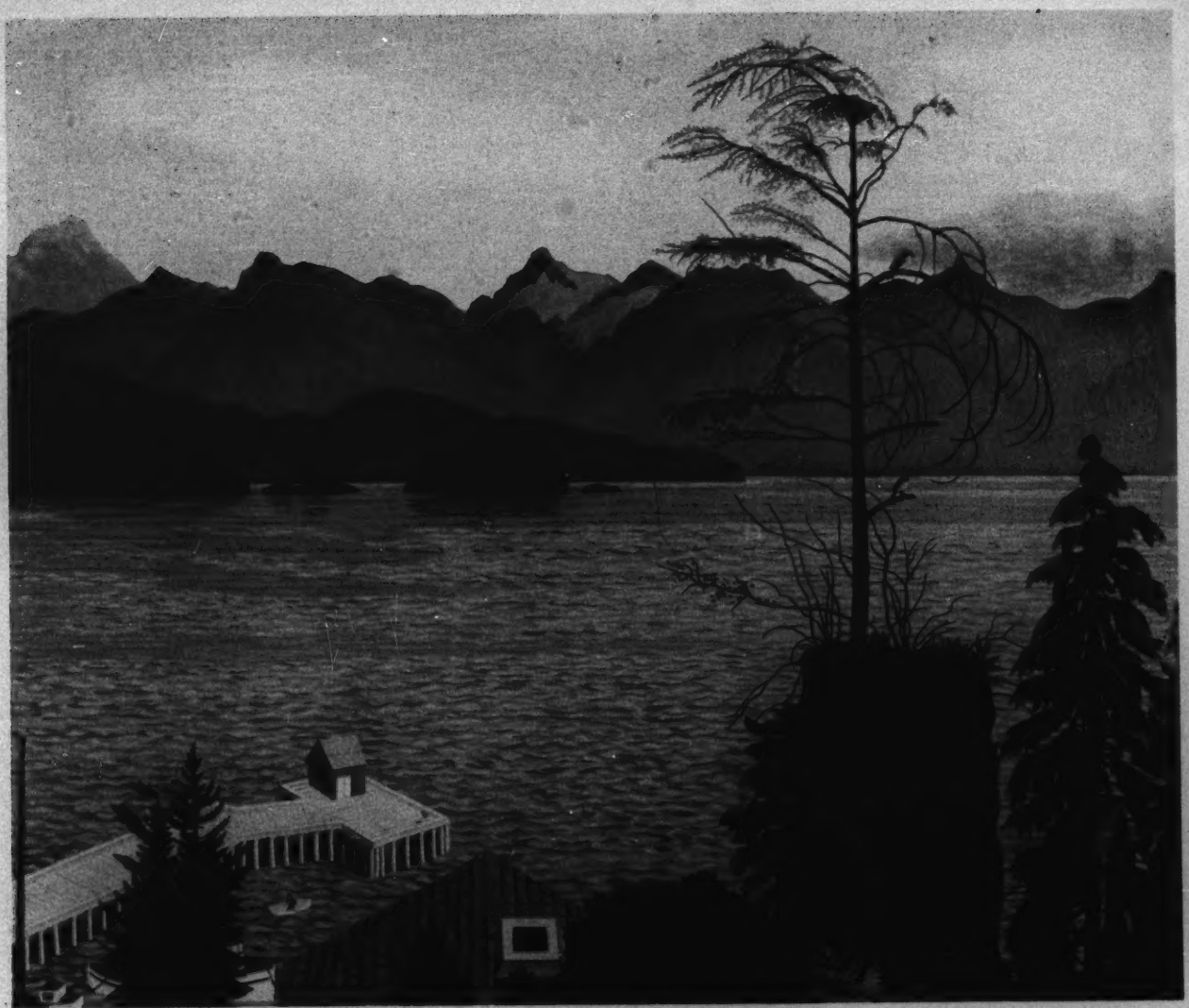
16 STEAMER ARRIVING AT NANAIMO
19 x 23
s.d. 1950, lower left
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Herbert R. Steinmann, New York



17 TUG BOATS, LADYSMITH HARBOUR
32 x 40
s.d. 1950, lower left
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

18 INDIAN HOUSES AT ALERT BAY
21 x 26
s.d. 1951, lower left
Lent by Mrs. Emme Frankenberg, Montreal

19 ARBUTUS TREES ON GABRIOLA
30 x 40
s.d. 1951, lower right
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Herbert R. Steinmann, New York



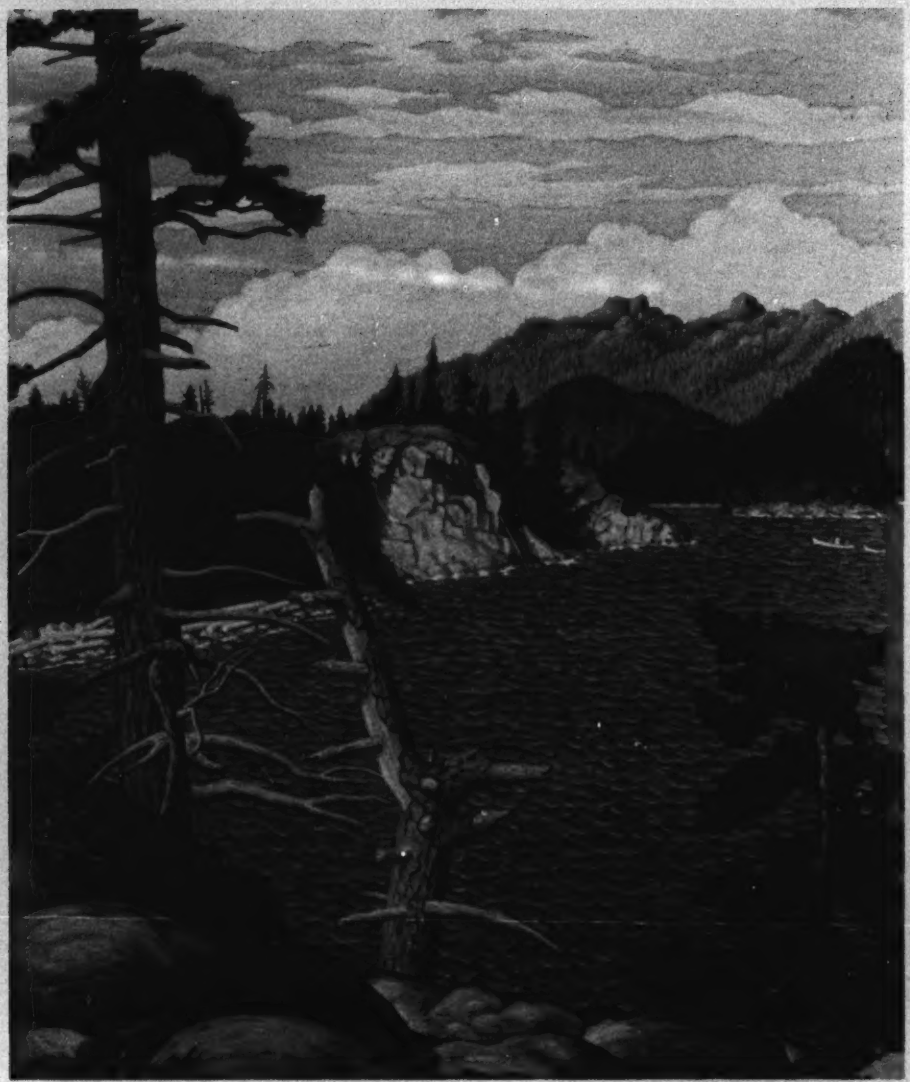
20 HOPKINS LANDING, HOWE SOUND
21⅛ x 26⅛
s.d. 1952, lower right
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Saul Shapiro, Montreal

21 **PORTRAIT**
20 x 16
s.d. 1952, lower left
Lent by Mrs. Emme Frankenberg, Montreal

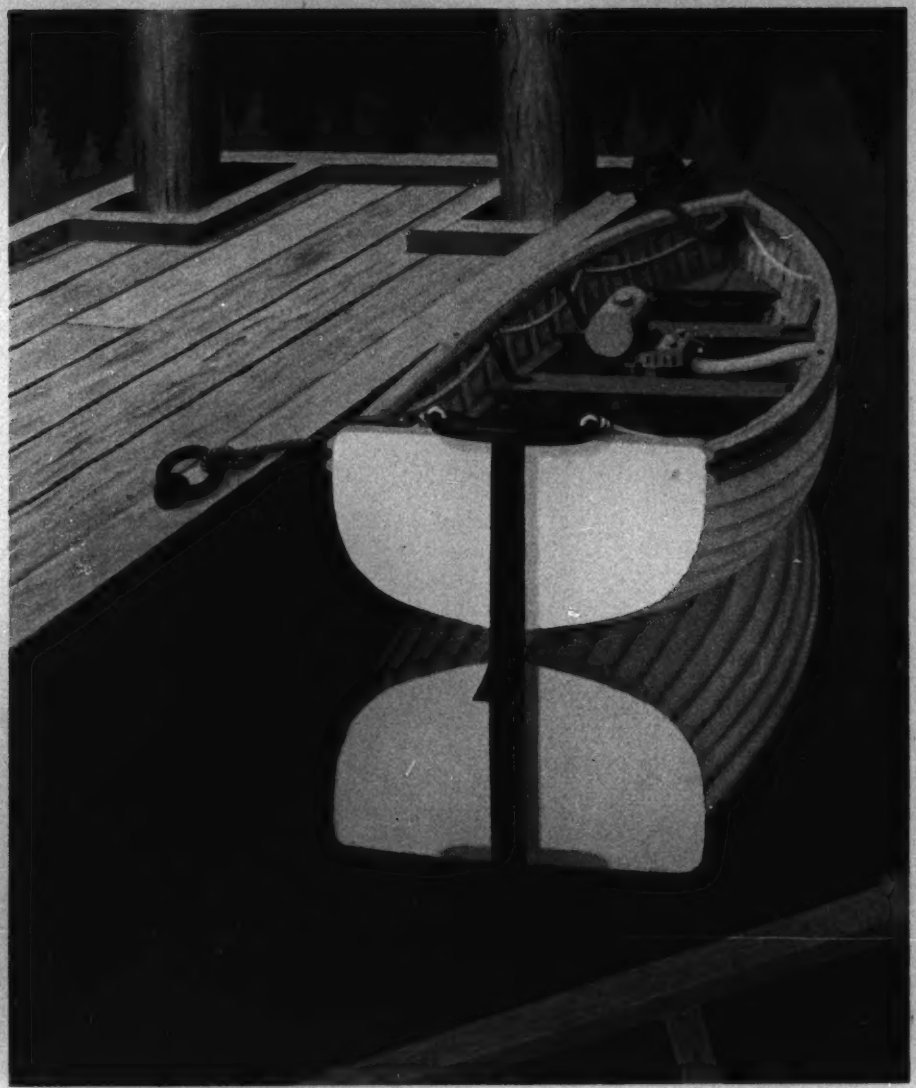
22 STEAMER IN GRENVILLE CHANNEL, B.C.
28 x 36
s.d. 1952, lower left
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Young-Brown, Montreal

23 MOUTH OF THE COURTENAY RIVER
30 x 40
s.d. 1952, lower right
Lent by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of B.C.

24 EDGE OF THE WOODS, GABRIOLA ISLAND
25 x 32
s.d. 1953, lower right
Private Collection, Vancouver



25 HOWE SOUND
30⅛ x 25⅛
s.d. 1955, lower left
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Max Stern,
Dominion Gallery, Montreal



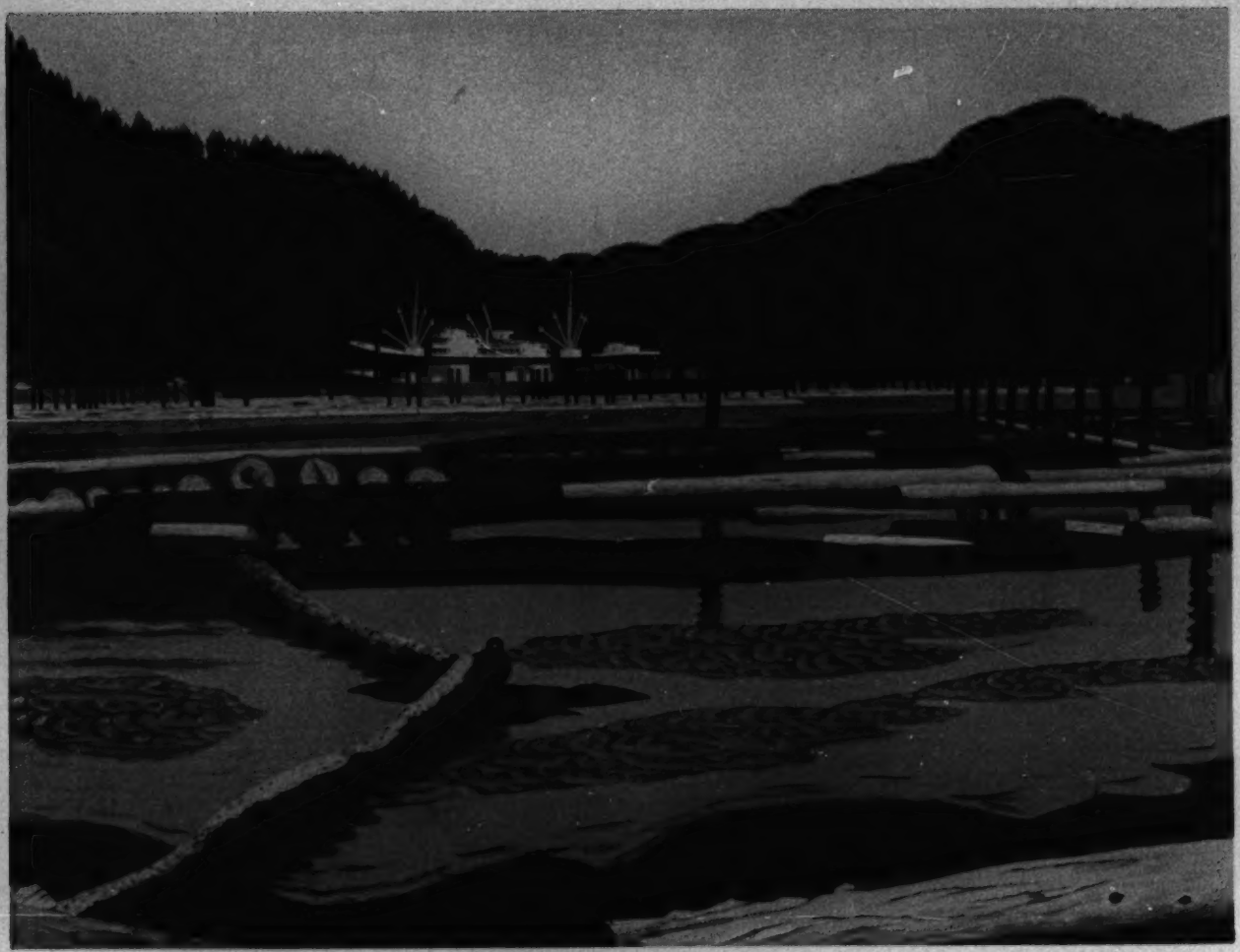
26 VILLAGE WHARF
24 x 20
s.d. 1956, top left
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

27 OUTSKIRTS OF CHILLIWACK
25 x 30
s.d. 1960, lower left
Lent by the Dominion Gallery, Montreal

28 LOOKING SOUTH OVER SKAHA LAKE
30⅛ x 40
s.d. 1961, lower right
Lent by the Dominion Gallery, Montreal

29 FREIGHTER AND COASTAL STEAMER NEAR SIDNEY, B.C.
25 x 30
s.d. 1962, lower left
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Ben Kanee, Vancouver

30 BREAKER BEACH VANCOUVER ISLAND
24 x 36
s.d. 1963, lower left
Lent by the Dominion Gallery, Montreal



31 HALF TIDE AT COWICHAN BAY
30 x 40
s.d. 1967, lower left
Lent by the Dominion Gallery, Montreal

DRAWINGS AND WATERCOLOURS

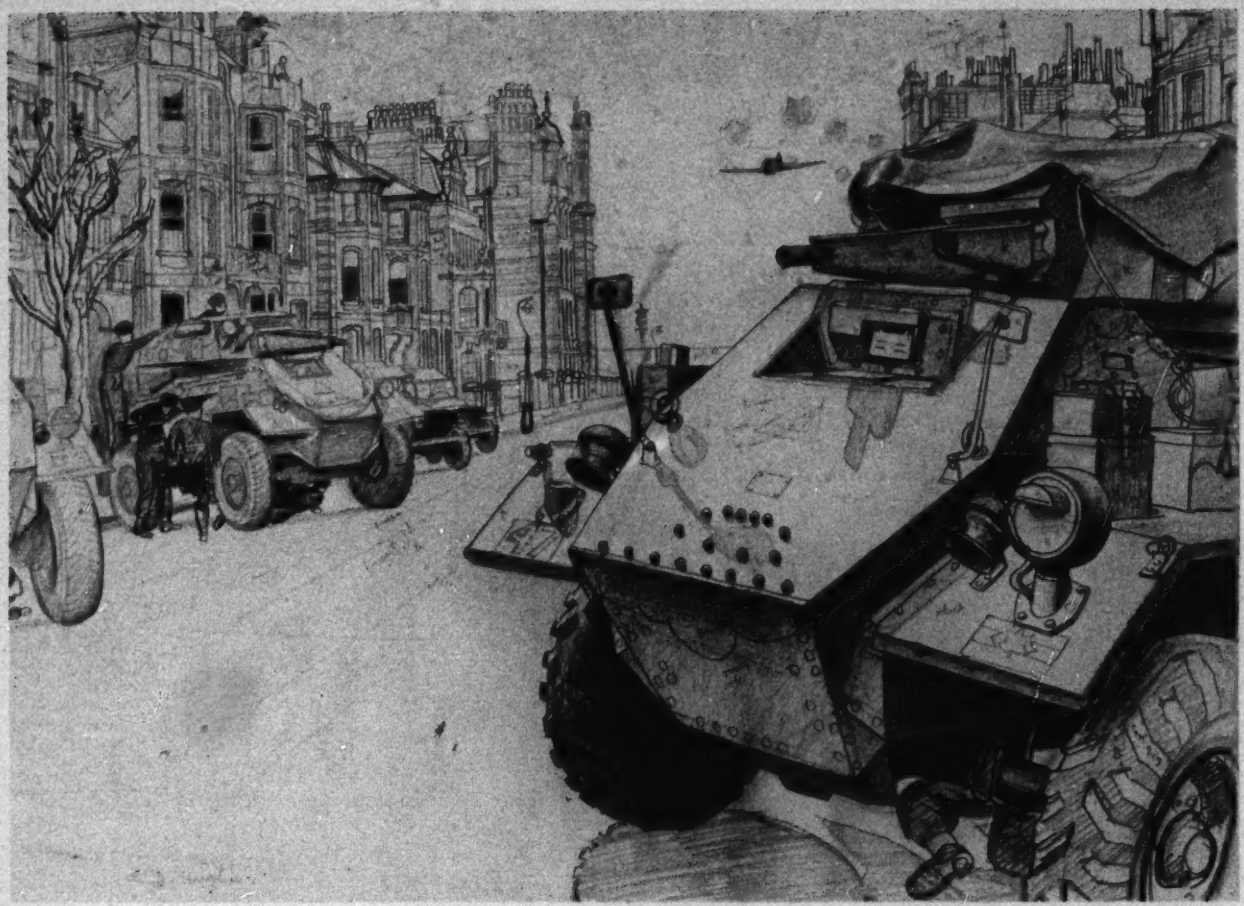
32 STUDIES FOR "THE SERGEANTS' MESS"
(four drawings mounted on one sheet)
a) 8 x 9 b) 8 x 8 c) 7¼ x 9¼ d) 7¼ x 8
pencil
Dec. 1940
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

33 THE SENTRY
16⅜ x 9 watercolour
s.d. 1940, lower left
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

34 PREPARE FOR ACTION
8⅜ x 14½ watercolour
s.d. 1941, lower right
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

35 18 CWT GUN TRUCK
9¾ x 13¾ (sight) pencil
s.d. Aug. 1942, lower right
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

36 CAMOUFLAGING AN ARMOURED CAR WITH NETS
14¾ x 19½ watercolour
s.d. 1943, lower right
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

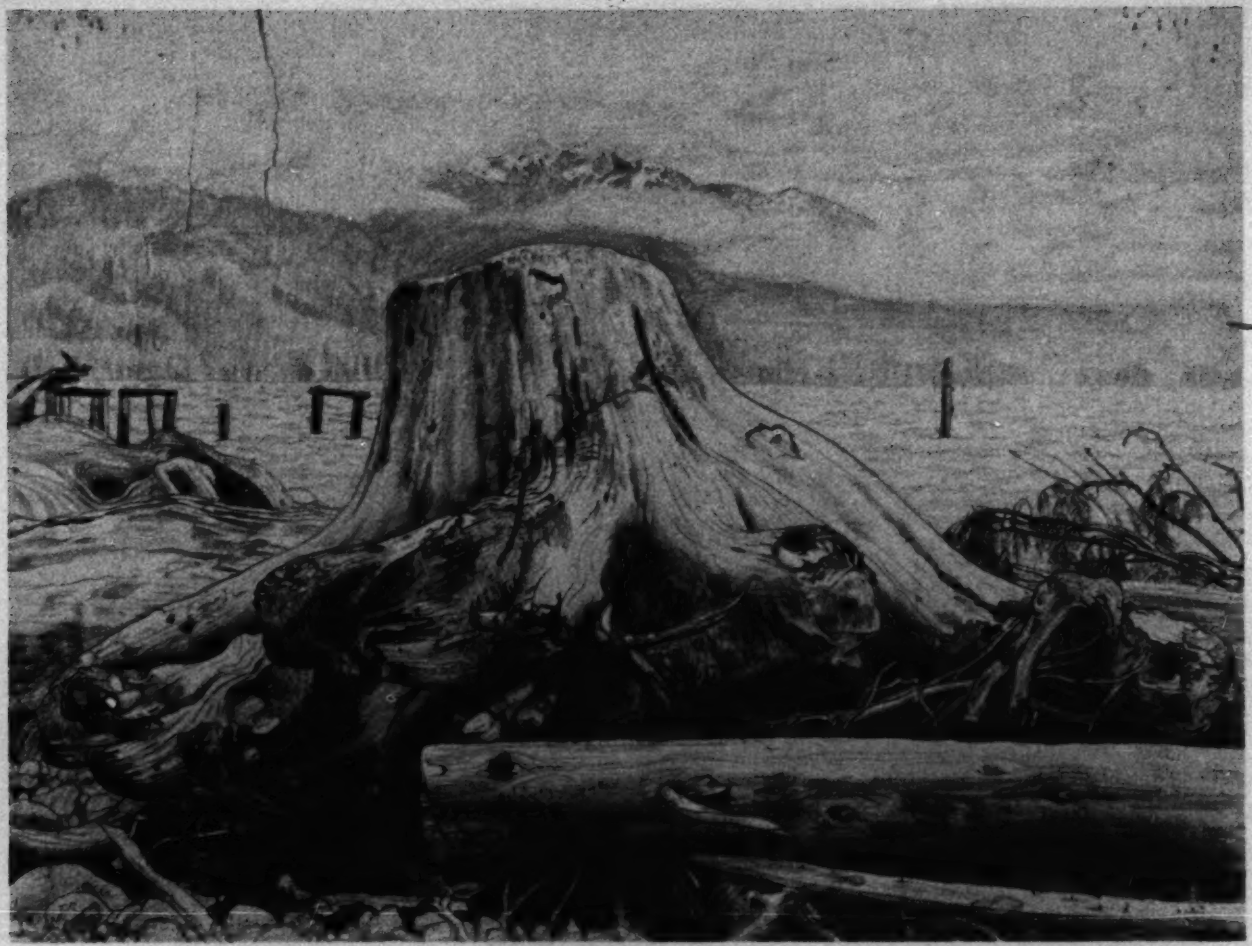


37 ENEMY PLANE APPROACHING
FROM THE SEA
10⅝ x 14⅞ pencil
s. lower left, 1943
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

38 BIVOUAC IN A SUSSEX WOOD
12 x 15⅛ watercolour
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

39 **PARADE GROUND ON KISKA**
21⅜ x 28⅜ conte
s.d. 1944, lower right
Lent by The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
(Canadian War Records Collection)

40 STANLEY PARK
(relates to No. 4 painted 1946-59)
8 x 12 pencil on card
s. lower right
Lent by the artist



41 RIVER'S INLET
(relates to No. 5 painted 1946)
9 x 12¼ pencil
Lent by the artist

42 INDIAN CHURCH
(relates to No. 6 painted 1947)
19½ x 23½ (sight) pencil
s. lower left
Lent by Canada Packers Ltd., Vancouver

43 INDIAN CHURCH
(cartoon relates to No. 6 painted 1947)
8¾ x 12⅛ pencil
s. lower right
Lent by the artist.

44 FARM NEAR COURTENAY
(relates to No. 10 painted 1949)
19½ x 25¼ (sight) pencil
s.d. 1948, lower right
The Vancouver Art Gallery, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Stern

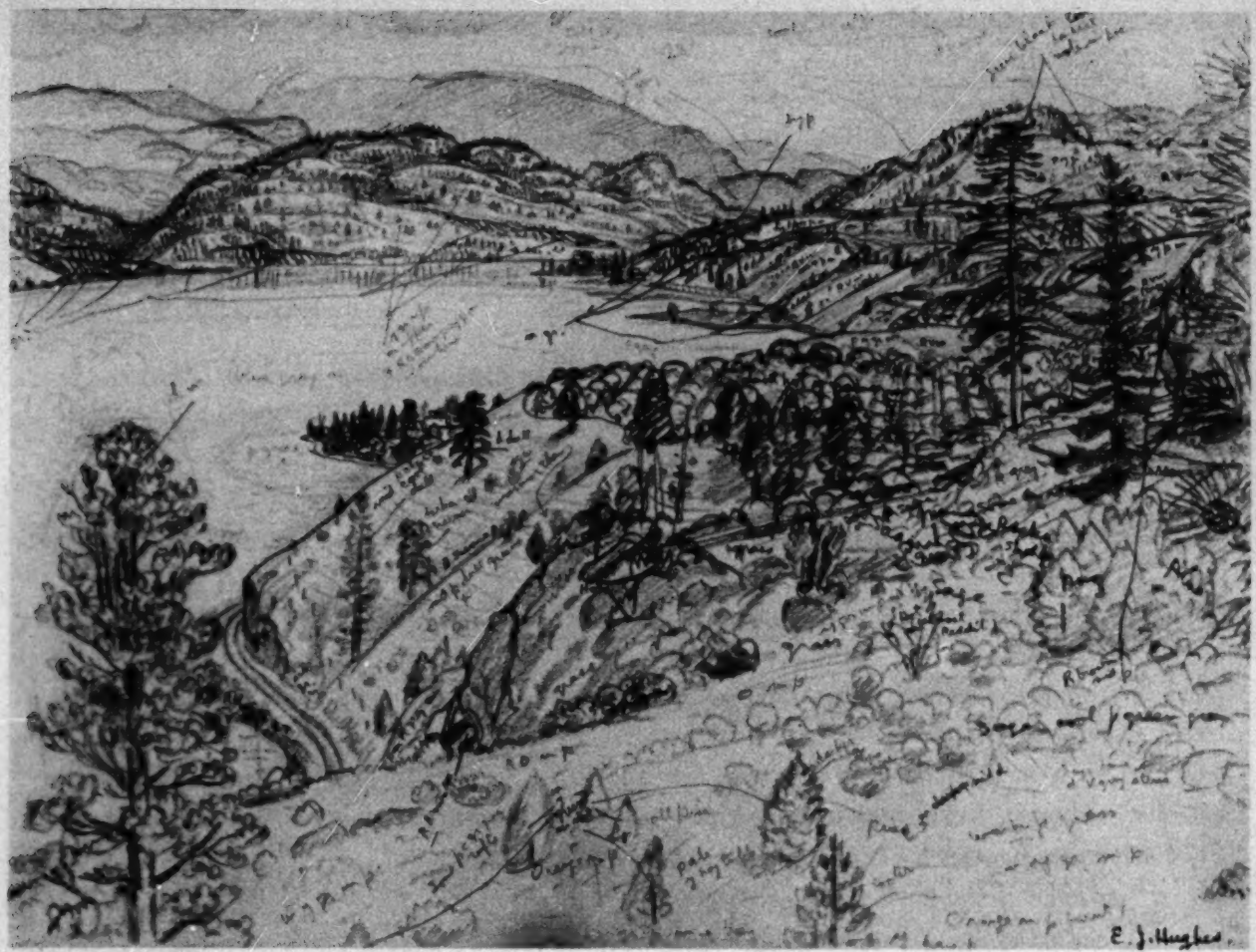
45 FARM NEAR COURTENAY
(relates to No. 10 painted 1949)
10⅜ x 14⅝ pencil
s. lower right
Lent by the artist

46 POST OFFICE AT COURTENAY
(relates to No. 11 painted 1949)
10½ x 14¾ pencil
s. lower right
Lent by the artist

47 CHURCH AT SANDWICK
15 x 19½ pencil
s.d. 1951, lower right (reverse)
Lent by Mrs. Melda Buchanan, Comox, B.C.

48 PORTRAIT
(relates to No. 21 painted 1952)
16⅜ x 11⅛ pencil
s. lower right
Lent by the artist

49 PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS, OTTAWA
20 x 24 watercolour
s.d. 1956, lower right
Lent by the Dominion Gallery, Montreal



50 LOOKING SOUTH OVER SKAHA LAKE
(relates to No. 28 painted 1961)
8¾ x 12 pencil
s. lower right
Lent by the artist

1913	born February 17, North Vancouver, British Columbia; early childhood spent in Nanaimo, Vancouver Island.
1929-35	studied Vancouver School of Art; teachers included F. H. Varley, J. W. G. (Jock) MacDonald.
1935-39	in Vancouver as free lance commercial artist; worked on dry points, lino-cuts; collaborated on murals for First United Church and W.K. Oriental Gardens, Vancouver; Malaspina Hotel, Nanaimo, and British Columbia display in the Western States Building, Golden Gate Exposition, San Francisco, 1939.
1939	enlisted Royal Canadian Artillery as gunner.
1940	became Army artist (Sgt.).
1942-46	official Army War Artist (Capt.) in Canada, Great Britain and the Aleutians (Alaska).
1946	returned to Vancouver Island to live, first in Victoria, then moving to Shawnigan Lake; spent five difficult restless years trying to earn a living as full-time painter.
1947	awarded Emily Carr scholarship.
1948	elected member Canadian Group of Painters; later resigned in protest against their "recognition of ugliness".
1954	a long-term contract with Dr. Stern of the Dominion Gallery, Montreal, made full-time painting a reality.
1954	commissioned by Standard Oil Company to travel on tanker to paint series of paintings of British Columbia coast.
1956	went on cross-country trip to paint Canadian cities.
1958, 1963	Canada Council grants utilized to travel and sketch on coast and in interior of British Columbia.
1958-1961	painted covers for British Columbia telephone directory.
1958	painted mural for Royal York *View from Qualicum Beach*.
1966	elected to Royal Canadian Academy.
1967	received Canada Council Award.